



**PETRARCA**

*Letter to Posterity*

## LETTER TO POSTERITY

YOU may, perhaps, have heard tell of me, though even this is doubtful, since a poor and insignificant name like mine will hardly have travelled far in space or time. If, however, you have heard of me, you may wish to know the kind of man I was or about the fruit of my labours, especially those you may have heard of or, at any rate, of those whose titles at least may have reached you.

To begin with myself, then, what men say about me will differ widely, since in passing judgement almost everyone is influenced not so much by truth as by whim; there is no measure for praise and blame. I was, in truth, one of your own, a poor mortal, neither of high origin, nor, on the other hand, of too humble birth, but belonging, as Augustus Caesar says of himself, to an old family. As for my disposition, I am not by nature evil or wanting in modesty except as contagious custom may have infected me. My youth was gone before I realized it; young manhood carried me away; but a maturer age brought me to my senses and taught me by experience the truth I had read in books long before: that youth and pleasure are vain—the lesson of that Author of all times and ages, Who permits wretched mortals, puffed with emptiness, to wander for a time until at last, becoming mindful of their sins, they learn to know themselves. In my youth I was blessed with an agile, active body, though not particularly strong; and while I cannot boast of being very handsome, I was good-looking enough in my younger days. I had a clear complexion, between light and dark, lively eyes, and for many years sharp vision, which, however, unexpectedly deserted me when I passed my sixtieth birthday, and forced me, reluctantly, to resort to the use of glasses. Although I had always been perfectly healthy, old age assailed me with its usual array of discomforts.

My parents were good people, Florentine in origin, and not too well off; in fact, I may as well admit it, they were on the

edge of poverty. Since they had been expelled from their native city, I was born to exile, at Arezzo, in the year 1304 of the age beginning with Christ's birth, July the twentieth, on a Monday, at dawn. I have always had great contempt for money; not that I wouldn't like to be rich, but because I hate the work and care which are invariably associated with wealth. I never liked to give great feasts; on the contrary, I have led a happier life with a plain diet and ordinary foods than all the followers of Aprius, with their elaborate dinners. So-called banquets, those vulgar bouts, hostile to sobriety and good manners, I have always found to be repugnant. I have always thought it tiresome and useless to invite others to such affairs, and no less so to be invited to them myself by others. On the other hand, to dine with one's friends I find most pleasant, and nothing has ever given me more delight than the unannounced arrival of a friend—nor have I ever willingly sat down to table without a friend. And nothing annoys me more than display, not only because it is bad in itself, and opposed to humility, but because it is disturbing and distracting.

In my younger days I struggled constantly with an overwhelming but pure love-affair—my only one, and I would have struggled with it longer had not premature death, bitter but salutary for me, extinguished the cooling flames.\* I certainly wish I could say that I have always been entirely free from desires of the flesh, but I would be lying if I did. I can, however, surely say this: that, while I was being carried away by the ardour of my youth and by my temperament, I always detested such sins from the depths of my soul. When I was nearing the age of forty, and my vigour and passions were still strong, I renounced abruptly not only those bad habits, but even the very recollection of them—as if I had never looked at a woman. This I consider to be among my greatest blessings, and I thank God, who freed me while I was still sound and vigorous from that vile slavery which I always found hateful. But let us turn to other matters now.

I have taken pride in others but never in myself, and insignificant as I was, I have always considered myself to be



even more so. As for anger, it very often did harm to me but never to others. I have always been most desirous of honourable friendships, and have cherished them faithfully. And I boast without fear, since I know I speak sincerely, that while I am prone to take offence, I am equally quick to forget offences and have a good memory for benefits received. I had the good fortune of associating with kings and princes, and having the friendship of nobles to the point of exciting envy. But it is the cruel fate of the elderly that sooner or later they must weep for friends who have passed away. Some of the greatest kings of this age have loved me and cultivated my friendship. They may know why; I certainly do not. I was on such terms with some of them that in a certain sense they seemed to be more my guests than I theirs; their eminence in no way made me uncomfortable; on the contrary, it brought with it many advantages. I kept aloof, however, from many of whom I was very fond; such was my innate spirit for freedom that I carefully avoided those whose high standing seemed to threaten the freedom I loved so much.

I had a well-balanced mind rather than a keen one, one adapted to all kinds of good and wholesome study, but especially inclined to moral philosophy and poetry. In the course of time I neglected the latter and found pleasure in sacred literature, finding in it a hidden sweetness which I had previously taken lightly, and I came to regard the works of the poets as mere amenities. Though I was interested in many subjects, I devoted myself especially to the study of antiquity, for I always disliked our own age—so much so, that had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I would have preferred to have been born in any other time than our own. In order to forget my own times, I have always tried to place myself mentally in another age; thus I delighted in history—though I was troubled by the conflicting statements, but when in doubt I accepted what appeared to me most probable, or else yielded to the authority of the writer.

Many people have said that my style is clear and compelling; but to me it seems weak and obscure. In fact, in ordinary conversation with friends, or acquaintances, I never

worried about my language, and I have always marvelled at the fact that Augustus Caesar took such pains in this respect. When, however, the subject-matter or the circumstances or the listener seemed to demand otherwise, I have given some attention to style, with what success, however, I cannot say. Let those to whom I spoke be the judges. If only I have lived well, I care little how well I spoke. Mere elegance of language can result at best in an empty reputation.

My life up to now has, through circumstances or my own choice, been disposed as follows. Some of my first year was spent at Arezzo, where I first saw the light of day; the following six years were, since my mother had by this time been recalled from exile, spent at my father's estate at Ancisa, about fourteen miles above Florence. My eighth year was spent at Pisa, the ninth and later years in Transalpine Gaul, at Avignon, on the left bank of the Rhone, where the Roman Pontiff holds and has long held the Church of Christ in shameful exile—though a few years ago it seemed as if Urban V was on the point of restoring the church to its ancient seat. But clearly nothing is coming of this effort and, what is worst of all, the Pope, while he was still living, seemed to repent of his good deed. If he had lived a little longer, he certainly would have learned what I thought of his return.\* My pen was in my hand when suddenly he gave up both his exalted office and his life. Unhappy man! To think he could have died before Saint Peter's altar and in his own home! Had his successors remained in their capital he would have been looked upon as the cause of this fortunate change or, had they left Rome, his virtue would have been all the more conspicuous as their fault, in contrast, would have been the more evident. But such lamentations here stray too far from my subject.

So then, on the windy banks of the river Rhone I spent my boyhood, under the care of my parents, and then, my entire youth under the direction of my own vanities. There were, however, long intervals spent elsewhere, for at that time I spent four full years in the little town of Carpentras, a little to the east of Avignon. In these two places I learned

as much grammar, logic, and rhetoric as my age permitted, or rather, as much as is usually taught in school, and how little that is, dear reader, you well know. Then I went to Montpellier to study law, and spent four years there, and then to Bologna for three years where I attended lectures on civil law, and many thought I would have done very well had I continued my studies. But I gave up the subject altogether as soon as it was no longer necessary to follow the wishes of my parents. It was not because I disliked the power and authority of the law, which is undoubtedly very great, or because of the endless references it contains to Roman antiquity, which I admired so, but rather because I felt it was being continuously degraded by those who practise it. I hated the idea of learning an art which I would not practise dishonestly, and could hardly hope to practise otherwise. Had I made the latter attempt, my scrupulousness would undoubtedly have been ascribed to incompetence.

So at the age of twenty-two I returned home. Since habit has nearly the force of nature, I call home my Avignon exile for I had lived there since childhood. I was already beginning to become known there, and my friendship was sought out by prominent men. Why, I do not know. I must confess that this is a source of surprise to me now, although it seemed natural enough at an age when we are used to considering ourselves as worthy of the highest respect. I was courted first and foremost by that eminent and noble Colonna family which at that period adorned the Roman Curia with their presence. While I might be now, at that time I was certainly unworthy of the esteem in which the family held me. I was especially welcomed and taken to Gascony by the incomparable Giacomo Colonna, then Bishop of Lombez,\* the like of whom I doubt that I have ever seen or ever shall see. There in the shade of the Pyrenees I spent a heavenly summer in delightful conversation with my master and the members of our company, and never do I recall the experience without a sigh of regret.

Returning, I spent many years in the house of Giacomo's brother, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, not as if I were a servant

and he my lord but rather as if he were my father, or better, a most affectionate brother. It was as though I were in my very own home. About this time, youthful curiosity impelled me to visit France and Germany. And while I invented other reasons to gain the approval of my elders for the journey, the real reason was burning desire for new sights. First I visited Paris, as I was anxious to discover what was true and what fictitious in the accounts I had heard of that city. After my return from this journey I went to Rome, which I had ardently desired to visit since I was a child. There I soon came to be a great admirer of Stefano, the noble head of the Colonna family, who was an ancient hero, and I was in turn so welcomed by him in every respect that it was as though I were his son. The affection and good will which this excellent man showed me persisted until the end of his life, and it lives with me still, and never will it fade, not until I myself cease to be.

Having returned I experienced the innate repugnance I have always felt for city life, and especially for that disgusting city of Avignon which I truly abhorred. Seeking some means of escape, I fortunately discovered a delightful valley, narrow and secluded, called Vaucluse, about fifteen miles from Avignon, where the Sorgue, the prince of streams, has its source. Captured by the charms of the place, I transferred myself and my books there. If I were to tell you what I did there during those many years, it would prove to be a long story. Indeed, almost every bit of writing I did was either done or begun or at least conceived there, and my undertakings were so numerous that even to the present day they keep me busy and weary. My mind, like my body, is more agile than strong, so that while it was easy for me to conceive of many projects, I would drop them because they were too difficult to execute. The aspect of my surroundings suggested my undertaking the composition of a sylvan or bucolic song, my *Bucolicum carmen*. I also composed a work in two books on *The Life of Solitude* (*De vita solitaria*), which I dedicated to Philip, now exalted to the Cardinal and Bishop of Sibina. He was always a great man, but at the time of



which I speak, he was only the humble Bishop of Cavaillon.\* He is the only one of my old friends who is still left, and he has always loved and treated me not episcopally, as Ambrose did Augustine, but as a brother.

One Friday in Holy Week while I was wandering in those mountains I had the strong urge to write an epic poem about Scipio Africanus the Great, whose name had been dear to me since childhood. While I began the project with great enthusiasm, I soon, owing to a variety of distractions, put it aside. The poem was called *Africa*, after its hero, and by some fate, whether the book's or my own, it did not fail to arouse the interest of many even before its publication.

While leading a leisurely existence there, on one and the same day,\* remarkable as it may seem, I received letters from both the Roman Senate and the Chancellor at the University of Paris, summoning me to appear in Rome and Paris, respectively, to receive the poet's laurel crown. In my youthful elation I convinced myself that I was quite worthy of this honour and recognition which came from such eminent judges, and I measured my own merit by the judgement of others. But I hesitated for a time over which invitation I should accept, and sent a letter to the Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, of whom I have already spoken, asking his opinion. He was so nearby that, having written to him late in the day, I had his reply before nine the next morning. I followed his advice, and recognized the claims of Rome as superior to all others (I still have the two letters I wrote to him on that occasion showing that I took his advice). So I set off for Rome. And although, as is the way of youth, I was a most indulgent judge of my own work, I was still uneasy about accepting my own estimation of myself as well as the verdict even of such men as those who summoned me, despite the fact that they would certainly not have honoured me with such an offer, if they had not believed me worthy.

So I decided to visit Naples first, and there I went to see that celebrated king and philosopher, Robert,\* who was as illustrious a ruler as he was a man of letters. He was, in truth, the only monarch of our times who was both a friend of



learning and of virtue, and I asked him to examine me in such things as he found to criticize in my work. The warmth of his reception and judgement remains to this day a source of astonishment to me, and undoubtedly also to the reader who happens to know something of the matter. When he learned the reason for my coming, the king seemed very pleased. He was gratified by my youthful faith in him, and felt, perhaps, that he shared in a way the glory of my coronation, since I had chosen him above all men as my qualified critic. After talking over a great many things, I showed him my *Africa*, which pleased him so much that he asked me as a great favour to dedicate it to him. This was a request I certainly could not refuse, nor, in fact, would I have wished to refuse, even had it been in my power. He then set a day during which he would consider the object of my visit. He kept me busy from noon until evening, and since the time proved too short, with one discussion leading to another, we spent the two following days in the same way. Thus, having tested my ignorance for three days, the king finally pronounced me worthy of the laurel. He wanted to bestow that honour upon me at Naples, and urged me to agree to this, but my love for Rome was stronger than the insistence of even so great a monarch as Robert. At length, finding me inflexible in my purpose, he sent me on my way with royal escorts and letters to the Roman Senate in which he enthusiastically expressed his flattering opinion of me. This royal judgement was in accord with that of many others, and especially with my own, but today I cannot accept either of those verdicts. In his case, there was more affection and encouragement of youth than devotion to truth.

So then, I went to Rome, and continuing in spite of my unworthiness to rely upon the judgement of so eminent a critic, I who had been merely a simple student received the laurel crown to the great joy of the Romans who attended the ceremony.\* This occasion is described elsewhere in my letters, both in prose and verse. The laurel, however, in no way gave me more wisdom, though it did arouse some envy—but that is a tale too long to be told here.

Leaving Rome, I went to Parma, and spent some time with the members of the Correggio family who were very good men and most generous to me but much at odds with each other. They gave Parma such a good government as it had never before had within the memory of man, and such as it is not likely ever to enjoy again.

I was most conscious of the honour I had just received, and worried for fear that I might seem to be unworthy of the distinction; consequently, as I was walking one day in the mountains and happened to cross the river Enza in the region of Reggio Selvapiana, I was struck by the beauty of the spot and began to write again the *Africa*, which I had put aside. In my enthusiasm, which had appeared to be dead, I wrote some lines that very day, and some more each day that followed until I returned to Parma. Here I happened to find a quiet and secluded house (which I later bought, and which is still my own), and I continued my task with such ardour and completed the work in so short a time, that the fact I did so still amazes me to this day.\* I was already thirty-four years old when I returned to the fountain of the Sorgue, and to my transalpine solitude. I had stayed long both in Parma and Verona,\* and I am thankful to say that everywhere I went I was treated with much greater esteem than I merited.

Some time after this, my growing reputation attracted the kindness of Giacomo the Younger of Carrara, a very fine man whose equal, I doubt, cannot be found among the rulers of his time. For years, when I was beyond the Alps, or whenever I happened to be in Italy, he constantly sent messengers and letters, and with his petitions he urged me to accept his friendship. At last, though I expected little satisfaction from the venture, I made up my mind to go to him and see what this insistence on the part of so eminent a person, and one who was a stranger to me, was all about. Then, after some time I went to Padua, where I was received by that man of illustrious memory not as a mere mortal might be received, but as the blessed are received in heaven—with such joy and such unbelievable affection and respect that I cannot adequately describe it in words and must, therefore, be silent.

Among other things, when he learned that I had been a cleric from boyhood, he had me made a canon of Padua in order to bind me closer to himself and to his city. In short, if his life had been longer, that would have put an end to all my wanderings. But alas! nothing mortal is enduring, and there is nothing sweet which sooner or later does not become bitter. He had scarcely given two years to me, to his country, and to the world before God, Who had given him to us, took him away.\* And it is not my blind love for him that makes me feel that neither I, nor his country, nor the world was worthy of him. Although the son, who succeeded him, was a very sensible and distinguished man, who like his father was always very cordial and respectful to me, I could stay no longer after the death of this man to whom I was so closely linked (even by the similarity of our ages) and I returned to France, not so much from desire to see again what I had already seen a thousand times, as from hope of getting rid of my misfortunes (the way a sick man does) with a change of scene. . . .\*



## EXPLANATORY NOTES

### LETTER TO POSTERITY

- 2 *In my younger days . . . the cooling flames*: this is an indirect reference to Laura. Nowhere in his poetry will he take so cool and therapeutic a view of his affair as he does here.
- 4 *the Pope . . . his return*: Urban V, Pope from 1362–70, moved the papal court back to Rome after it had been in Avignon, France, for sixty years; however, after little more than a year in Italy, for no definite reason and in spite of his good intentions, he returned with the court to Avignon where he died shortly afterwards, in 1370.
- 5 *Lombez*: a town 30 miles south-west of Toulouse.
- 7 *Cavaillon*: the castle of Cavaillon is not far from the valley of the Sorgue.  
*on one and the same day*: when Petrarch was 36 years old: 1 September 1340.  
*that celebrated king and philosopher, Robert*: Robert was the grandson of Charles of Anjou, the brother of St Louis. He was Petrarch's sovereign since Avignon belonged to him as Count of Provence. Robert was in residence at Avignon between 1318–24.
- 8 *the Romans who attended the ceremony*: on Easter Sunday, 8 April 1341.
- 9 *the fact . . . amazes me to this day*: the Africa was actually never completed. We know from another letter of his that the older Petrarch became the more he disliked his great epic.  
*I had stayed long . . . Verona*: the poet returned to Vacluse in 1342 when he was close to 38 years old.
- 10 *God . . . took him away*: Giacomo was murdered by his nephew in December 1350.  
*a change of scene . . .*: the autobiographical letter stops at this point, and no explanation for the abrupt ending is given.

## A CHRONOLOGY OF PETRARCH

- 1304 Born in Arezzo on 20 July
- 1312 The family moves to Avignon. Petrarch attends school in Carpentras
- 1316 Attends the University of Montpellier
- 1320 Studies law at the University of Bologna until 1326
- 1326 His father dies and he returns to Avignon
- 1327 Meets Laura on 6 April and begins composing his Italian love-lyrics
- 1330 Enters the service of Cardinal Giovanni Colonna
- 1333 He tours Paris, the Low Countries, and Rhineland
- 1336 The ascent of Mount Ventoux
- 1337 His son Giovanni is born. He visits Rome for the first time. He goes to stay in Vaucluse for the first time and remains until 1341
- 1341 His coronation with laurels in Rome on Easter Day. His first stay in Parma for a year
- 1342 He stays in Avignon for a year
- 1343 He visits Naples for the second time. His daughter Francesca is born. He stays in Parma a second time until 1345
- 1345 On a visit to Verona he discovers a manuscript of Cicero's *Letters*. He stays a second time in Vaucluse until 1347
- 1347 He stays a third time in Parma and travels to other parts of Italy until 1351
- 1348 The Black Death. Laura dies
- 1350 He visits Florence and meets Boccaccio. Goes to Rome for the Papal Jubilee
- 1351 Returns to Avignon and stays in Vaucluse for a third time until 1353
- 1353 He stays in Milan under the patronage of the Visconti family until 1361

- 1361 Visits Paris for a second time. His son dies. He lives in Padua, Venice, and Pavia until 1369
- 1369 He makes Arquà his last permanent residence
- 1374 Dies in Arquà on 19 July